

# Tunisia: In Brief

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## Summary

A decade after a popular uprising in Tunisia set off the “Arab Spring,” Tunisia’s ability to sustain the sole democratic political system to emerge from that wave of regional unrest is now in question. On July 25, 2021, amid political gridlock and economic and health crises, President Kaïs Saïed unilaterally dismissed the prime minister and suspended parliament. He then asserted the right to rule by decree and an intent to amend the constitution and electoral law. Saïed’s assertion of sweeping executive powers has fueled uncertainty about the future of Tunisia’s democracy, which successive U.S. Administrations and Congress have sought to foster.

Tunisian reactions to the president’s actions have varied amid shared concerns about economic suffering, partisan infighting, police abuses, and the dismissed prime minister’s ineffective response to an acute wave of Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) cases in mid-2021. Polls suggest that President Saïed remains popular, particularly in comparison to his political opponents. In September and October, thousands of Tunisians turned out in rival protests for and against the president. It is unclear whether Tunisia is likely to return to a democratic political system, move further into presidential authoritarianism, or experience greater instability if the economy worsens and tensions among political factions escalate.

The United States and Tunisia have cultivated warm ties since 2011, underpinned by U.S. support for Tunisia’s democratic transition and security cooperation to counter regional terrorism threats. Since July 25, the Biden Administration has called for “a clear roadmap for a return to a transparent, democratic process” and expressed concerns about recent “infringements” on civil liberties. Prior to July 25, Biden Administration officials pursued high-level diplomatic and military engagements with Tunisian counterparts, albeit constrained by COVID-19 restrictions.

A number of Members of Congress have expressed concern about President Saïed’s recent actions, on a bipartisan basis. Some have called on the executive branch to review or suspend certain U.S. aid and/or security cooperation, with some citing the role of Tunisia’s military in enforcing some of President Saïed’s political maneuvers, among other factors. In recent years, Congress set a minimum floor of aid to Tunisia in annual appropriations measures, most recently \$191 million in FY2021 aid and \$50 million in additional prior-year funds under P.L. 116-260. Additional funds have been allocated for Tunisia via global and regional aid and security cooperation programs. Congress has continued to make funds available for U.S. loan guarantees for Tunisia (including under P.L. 116-260), although the United States has not provided one since 2016. The Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) has approved—but not signed—a \$499 million development aid compact to strengthen Tunisia’s transportation, trade, and water sectors.

The House-passed FY2022 State, Foreign Operations and Related Programs (SFOPS) appropriations bill, H.R. 4373, would provide at least \$197 million in aid for Tunisia, equivalent to the Biden Administration’s budget proposal. Reporting the bill on July 6, House appropriators asserted that “a stable and viable democratic Tunisia is critical to regional security” (H.Rept. 117-84). The Senate FY2022 SFOPS appropriations bill (S. 3075), as introduced, would not set a minimum floor of aid for Tunisia and would institute new reporting and notification requirements prior to the obligation of military and economic aid funds.

The U.S. Embassy in Tunis hosts the U.S. Libya External Office, through which U.S. diplomats engage with Libyans and monitor U.S. programs in Libya; see CRS Report RL33142, *Libya: Conflict, Transition, and U.S. Policy*, by Christopher M. Blanchard.

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## Introduction

In 2011, Tunisians ousted authoritarian leader Zine el Abidine Ben Ali in a popular uprising that sparked a wave of unrest and political change across the Arab world. In the years that followed, civil liberties expanded dramatically in Tunisia, an elected assembly drafted and approved a new constitution, and a Truth and Dignity Commission investigated abuses under the former regime. While other countries affected by the 2011 “Arab Spring” went on to face brutal conflicts and/or resurgent authoritarianism, a quartet of Tunisian civil society groups won the 2015 Nobel Peace Prize for mediating political talks that paved the way for the new constitution. Elections for new municipal-level posts in 2018 marked a key step toward long-sought political decentralization. Successive national elections resulted in peaceful transfers of power—most recently in 2019, with the election as president of a populist candidate who had never held public office, Kaïs Saïed.<sup>1</sup>

Many Tunisians nonetheless view the promise of the 2011 uprising as unfulfilled: in one 2019 poll, 87% of respondents said their country was headed in the wrong direction.<sup>2</sup> Key institutional reforms stalled over the past decade, while perceived corruption rose. Average incomes and living standards have fallen, eroding Tunisia’s once robust middle class. Political alliances among rival Islamist and secularist leaders have helped quiet conflicts over identity and the role of religion in public life, but arguably at the expense of clear policy direction or accountability to voters. Frustrations over high unemployment and inflation, corruption, and police brutality have spurred protests, labor unrest, and a voter backlash against mainstream politicians.

Severe hardships wrought by the Coronavirus Diseases 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic deepened popular discontent in the first half of 2021 against the backdrop of perceived political dysfunction. A power struggle between President Saïed and then-Prime Minister Hichem Mechichi dominated government affairs, while the parliament exhibited paralysis, personal insults, and occasional physical violence.<sup>3</sup> In July 2021, Tunisian officials warned that the health system was close to “collapse” due to an acute wave of COVID-19 cases and deaths.<sup>4</sup>

It was in this tense context that many Tunisians celebrated President Saïed’s announcement on July 25, 2021, that he was dismissing the prime minister, suspending parliament, and lifting parliamentary immunity, citing Article 80 of the constitution.<sup>5</sup> President Saïed subsequently extended parliament’s suspension indefinitely, asserted the right to govern by decree, suspended much of the constitution, and announced plans to amend the constitution and electoral law.<sup>6</sup> On

<sup>1</sup> Just prior to the 2019 elections, the government also instituted an orderly succession after the death in office of the previous president, Béji Caïd Essebsi.

<sup>2</sup> International Republican Institute (IRI), *Public Opinion Survey: Residents of Tunisia, January 25-February 11, 2019*. See also Project on Middle East Democracy (POMED), “Expert Q&A – Tunisians Reflect on the Tenth Anniversary of the Dignity Revolution,” December 17, 2020; and Arab Barometer V, *Tunisia Country Report*, 2019, in which Tunisian respondents ranked economic issues as their top concern and indicated that public safety and the quality of government services had declined in recent years while corruption had expanded.

<sup>3</sup> Tunisie Afrique Presse (TAP), “Assault On Abir Moussi - LTDH Calls On the Ministry of Women and Public Prosecutor to Take Necessary Measures,” July 1, 2021; , Anne Wolf, “The Counterrevolution Gains Momentum in Tunisia: The Rise of Abir Moussi,” POMED, November 2020.

<sup>4</sup> Reuters, “Tunisia says health care system collapsing due to COVID-19,” July 8, 2021.

<sup>5</sup> Article 80 grants and limits presidential authorities “in the event of imminent danger.” It states that parliament “shall be deemed to be in continuous session,” does not explicitly grant the president authority to dismiss the cabinet, and states that measures “shall guarantee, as soon as possible, a return to the normal functioning of state institutions.”

<sup>6</sup> Presidential Decree No. 2021-117, September 22, 2021; Reuters, “Tunisian President Declares Transitional Rules, New Electoral Law,” September 21, 2021; and Reuters, “Tunisia’s President Saïed Indicates He Will Amend Constitution,” September 12, 2021.

September 29, President Saïed named a new prime minister—Najla Bouden Romdhane, a geology professor and the first woman to hold the position in Tunisia and the Arab world—while limiting her authority.<sup>7</sup> On October 11, a new cabinet of mostly technocrats was sworn into office.

President Saïed has invoked undefined imminent threats in asserting sweeping authorities, but he has long been a prominent critic of directly elected parliaments, political parties, and Tunisia's post-2011 political system and leaders.<sup>8</sup> He has pledged since July 25 to protect individual freedoms and suggested that he plans to hold national consultations on next steps, but human rights advocates have expressed alarm about the concentration of powers in the president's hands and the apparent lack of due process in recent actions against politicians, political parties, business figures, and journalists.<sup>9</sup> President Saïed's deployment of the military to bar the gates of parliament has been among the starkest symbols of his actions.

As of October 2021, polls suggested that President Saïed remained popular—particularly compared to prominent political opponents, such as speaker of parliament Rached Ghannouchi.<sup>10</sup> In September and October, thousands of Tunisians turned out in rival protests for and against the president. It remains to be seen whether Saïed can deliver improvements in Tunisians' daily lives, and how he might respond if more of the public turns against his leadership. Broader coalition building could bridge political divides; greater polarization and confrontation are also possible.

U.S. officials heralded Tunisia's post-2011 political transition, and U.S. aid and diplomatic engagement expanded significantly over the past decade—with bipartisan support from Congress, albeit accompanied by debate over appropriate scale and conditions.<sup>11</sup> Since the events of July 2021, the Biden Administration has called for “a clear roadmap for a return to a transparent, democratic process, involving civil society and diverse political voices” and expressed concern about “recent reports from Tunisia on infringements on freedom of the press and expression.”<sup>12</sup>

A number of Members of Congress also have expressed concern about President Saïed's recent actions on a bipartisan basis, including during a House Foreign Affairs subcommittee hearing on October 14.<sup>13</sup> Several have called on the executive branch to review—and possibly suspend—

<sup>7</sup> Under Decree No. 2021-117, the president appoints the prime minister and sets “general policy,” which the cabinet implements. Under the 2014 constitution, the prime minister sets “general policy” and is confirmed by parliament, along with the cabinet; the president's executive powers are limited to defense, foreign relations, and national security.

<sup>8</sup> See Mohamed-Dhia Hammami, “Past as Prologue: Kaïs Saïed's Prior Statements Point To Upcoming Political Moves,” POMED, August 10, 2021.

<sup>9</sup> HRW, “Tunisia: President's Repressive Policies Abrogate Rights,” September 11, 2021; Amnesty International, “Carving up the Constitution represents a threat to human rights,” October 2, 2021.

<sup>10</sup> See, e.g., Zogby Research Services, *Tunisia's Bumpy Road*, October 4, 2021. Other polls published in Tunisia have suggested higher levels of public backing for President Saïed's actions.

<sup>11</sup> See “Tunisia,” in CRS Report R46796, *Congress and the Middle East, 2011-2020: Selected Case Studies*.

<sup>12</sup> State Department press briefing, October 7, 2021.

<sup>13</sup> House Foreign Affairs Committee (HFAC), Subcommittee on the Middle East, North Africa and Global Counterterrorism, “Tunisia: Examining the State of Democracy and Next Steps for U.S. Policy,” October 14, 2021. See also, e.g., HFAC, “Meeks, Deutch Issue Statement on Developments in Tunisia,” July 26, 2021; statement by the Senate Foreign Relations Committee (SFRC) on Twitter, July 26, 2021, 9:21am; HFAC Republicans, “McCaul Statement on Events in Tunisia,” July 27, 2021; NATO Parliamentary Assembly, “NATO PA President's statement on the situation in Tunisia,” July 27, 2021; House Democracy Partnership, “Bipartisan House Democracy Partnership Co-Chairs Release Statement on the Situation in Tunisia,” July 30, 2021; SFRC, “Chairman Menendez, Ranking Member Risch Joint Statement on Political Crisis in Tunisia,” August 5, 2021; HFAC, “McCaul, Meeks, Deutch, Wilson Issue Statement on Recent Developments in Tunisia,” August 31, 2021; U.S. Embassy in Tunisia, “U.S. Congressional Delegation Led by Senators Chris Murphy and Jon Ossoff Met President Kais Saïed,” September 5, 2021.

certain U.S. aid and/or security cooperation.<sup>14</sup> FY2022 aid appropriations bills passed by the House on July 28 (H.R. 4373) and introduced in the Senate on October 26 (S. 3075) would not specifically restrict aid to Tunisia. The House-passed bill would provide at least \$197 million in bilateral aid, equivalent to the Biden Administration's budget proposal. The Senate-introduced bill would institute new reporting and notification requirements prior to obligating military or economic aid for Tunisia, and would not specify a minimum floor of aid for the country.

**Figure 1. Tunisia at a Glance**



**Population:** 11.8 million  
**Urban Population:** 70% of total  
**Religions:** Muslim (official; Sunni) 99%, other (includes Christian, Jewish, Shia Muslim, and Baha'i) <1%  
**Ethnicities:** Arab 98%, European 1%, Jewish/other 1%  
**Median Age:** 32.7 years  
**Life Expectancy:** 76.6 years  
**Literacy:** 82%; male 90% / female 74% (2015 est.)  
**Unemployment:** 17.4% (2020); ages 15-24, 35% (2017)  
**GDP Growth:** -8.6% contraction (2020)  
**GDP Per Capita:** \$3,295 (2020)  
**Government Gross Debt (% GDP):** 90%  
**Key Exports:** insulated wiring, clothing and apparel, crude petroleum, olive oil, vehicle parts  
**Key Import Partners:** France 29%, Italy 17%, Germany 13% (2019)  
**Key Imports:** refined petroleum, natural gas, low-voltage protection equipment, cars, insulated wiring  
**Key Import Partners:** France 17%, Italy 16%, Germany 8%, China 8%, Algeria 7% (2019)

**Source:** CRS graphic. Map information from U.S. Department of State, ESRI. Figures from CIA *World Factbook* and International Monetary Fund (IMF, October 2021); 2021 estimates unless noted.

### Tunisia and COVID-19

Confirmed COVID-19 cases and deaths in Tunisia most recently peaked in July 2021, similar to other countries in North Africa. As of late October, Tunisia had experienced the fourth-highest per-capita number of confirmed COVID-19 infections in Africa and the highest per capita COVID-19 death rate since the start of the pandemic, according to data compiled by Reuters. After initial challenges, Tunisia's vaccination program saw significant advances starting in July 2021, when President Saïed put the military in charge of COVID-19 efforts and donors—including the United States—increased vaccine deliveries. As of late October, nearly 40% of Tunisians were reportedly fully vaccinated—among the higher rates in Africa. On September 27, the Health Ministry announced plans to administer booster shots to people over 50 and those with chronic medical conditions.

In March 2020, Tunisia initiated travel restrictions, business closures, and other emergency measures in response to the pandemic. Some restrictions were lifted in mid-2020 and subsequently re-imposed during successive waves of virus cases. In late September 2021, the government lifted nearly all remaining restrictions—including a nightly

<sup>14</sup> HFAC Tunisia hearing, op. cit., and *The CT Mirror*, “Murphy: Tunisia’s president Saïed is not keeping his word,” September 27, 2021; *Tunisie Numérique*, “3 members of US congress call on Biden to intervene to restore Tunisian parliament,” September 25, 2021; statement by Representative Ilhan Omar on Twitter, July 27, 2021, 11:56am.

curfew and internal travel restrictions—in favor of a new proof of vaccination requirement for participation in public and private events, activities, and gatherings; a mask requirement in public spaces has remained in place.<sup>15</sup>

## Background: The “Jasmine Revolution” and Tunisia Prior to 2011

Prior to 2011, Tunisia was widely viewed as exhibiting a stable and authoritarian regime that focused on economic growth while staving off political liberalization. It had had only two leaders since independence from France in 1956: Habib Bourguiba, a secular nationalist and former independence activist, and Ben Ali, a former interior minister and prime minister who assumed the presidency in 1987. The country’s pre-2011 economic model has since come under greater scrutiny; for example, the World Bank documented in 2014 that government regulations had apparently been manipulated to favor firms closely tied to the Ben Ali family.<sup>16</sup>

Ben Ali cultivated the internal security services and the Constitutional Democratic Rally (RCD) party as his power base, and harshly repressed political opposition, freedom of expression, and religious activism. This repression, along with corruption and nepotism, undermined the regime’s popular legitimacy, despite relatively effective state services and economic growth. Another factor driving popular dissatisfaction was the enduring socioeconomic divide between the developed, tourist-friendly coast and the poorer interior. Anti-government unrest rooted in labor and economic grievances has often originated in the interior, including in late 2010.

### Tunisia’s “Jasmine Revolution”

In December 2010, antigovernment protests broke out in Tunisia’s interior after a street vendor named Mohamed Bouazizi set himself on fire in the town of Sidi Bouzid to protest state repression and a lack of economic opportunities. Protests spread to neighboring towns and eventually to the capital, Tunis, and to wealthy coastal communities associated with the ruling elite. Police opened fire on protesters and made sweeping arrests; an estimated 338 people were killed.<sup>17</sup> The army, however, apparently refused an order to use force against demonstrations, which became a key turning point in the crisis. On January 14, 2011, President Ben Ali, in power since 1987, fled the country for Saudi Arabia. Tunisian courts brought various criminal charges against him in absentia. Ben Ali passed away in Saudi Arabia from natural causes on September 19, 2019.

## Politics: Context

Dozens of political parties—most established after 2011—represent a range of ideologies and constituencies, including Islamist, secularist, leftist, and pro-business perspectives. Between 2014 and 2019, two parties were dominant: Al Nahda (alt: Ennahda, “Renaissance”), a self-described “Muslim Democrat” party that was banned prior to 2011, and Nidaa Tounes (“Tunisia’s Call”), a big-tent secularist party founded in 2012 in opposition to Al Nahda. Despite being rivals, the two parties agreed to share power in a “consensus” coalition. The Tunisian General Labor Union (UGTT) has also played a prominent role in national politics, both as a platform advocating left-leaning economic policies and as a mediator in national political disputes.

The consensus coalition government oversaw landmark local-level elections in 2018 and the passage of a new law against gender-based violence in 2017. Yet declining living standards, fiscal austerity measures adopted at the urging of international financial institutions, internal power

<sup>15</sup> U.S. Embassy in Tunisia, “COVID-19 Information,” updated October 29, 2021.

<sup>16</sup> World Bank, *The Unfinished Revolution*, May 2014.

<sup>17</sup> Associated Press, “Report Raises Number of Killed During Tunisia’s Revolution to 338,” May 5, 2012.



struggles, and perceived corruption eroded public support for government leaders.<sup>18</sup> The coalition enacted a controversial “reconciliation” law in 2017 granting amnesty for officials implicated in corruption under the Ben Ali regime,<sup>19</sup> and the Truth and Dignity Commission reported obstruction from government officials.<sup>20</sup> Partisan disputes precluded the establishment of a Constitutional Court, a new body mandated under the 2014 constitution; in its absence, Tunisia lacks a competent body to judge constitutional disputes. Nidaa Tounes split into factions due to ideological as well as personal schisms, and split with Al Nahda over whether to pursue new legal reforms in support of gender equality. President Caïd Essebsi’s death in office in July 2019 further reshaped the political landscape.

## The 2019 Elections: An electoral reset

In general elections held in September and October 2019, newcomers and independent candidates outperformed many established politicians, reflecting voter discontent and shaking up past political alliances. International observers praised the 2019 election process as generally well administered, while raising concerns about the timing and appearance of political selectivity behind the imprisonment of a leading presidential candidate, Nabil Karoui, on money laundering charges.<sup>21</sup> Domestic election observer groups reported some procedural irregularities and alleged violations of regulations regarding campaign finance and campaign activities.<sup>22</sup>

Kais Saïed, a professor of constitutional law who had never held elected office, narrowly outperformed a crowded field of candidates in the first-round presidential vote. Campaigning as an “anti-system” candidate, he went on to win a landslide victory (73% of the vote) in a run-off against Karoui, a secularist media mogul.<sup>23</sup> Al Nahda’s presidential nominee (its first ever) placed third in the first round, and the party backed Saïed in the run-off. The run-off results reportedly reflected “a groundswell of support from young voters.”<sup>24</sup> Increased turnout in the run-off vote (55%, over six percentage points higher than in the first round) also suggested high enthusiasm for Saïed, as did spontaneous public street-cleaning initiatives to express support after he won.

### Who is President Kais Saïed?

President Kais Saïed, 63, is a constitutional law professor who ran on an anti-corruption and anti-establishment platform.<sup>25</sup> As a professor and later as a candidate, Saïed criticized the political system enshrined in Tunisia’s 2014

<sup>18</sup> See, e.g., Sharan Grewal and Shadi Hamid, “The dark side of consensus in Tunisia: Lessons from 2015-2019,” Brookings, January 2020; *New York Times*, “Belt-Tightening Demands Put Tunisia’s Democracy at Risk,” May 3, 2018; Sarah Yerkes and Marwan Muasher, “Tunisia’s Corruption Contagion: A Transition at Risk,” CEIP, 2017.

<sup>19</sup> See International Center for Transitional Justice, “ICTJ Comments on Draft Organic Bill Number 49/2015 Pertaining to Reconciliation in the Administrative Field,” September 14, 2017.

<sup>20</sup> Truth & Dignity Commission, *The Final Comprehensive Report*, May 2019.

<sup>21</sup> Carter Center, *2019 Presidential and Parliamentary Elections in Tunisia: Final Report*, July 1, 2020; IRI/National Democratic Institute (NDI), *Tunisia International Election Observation Mission Final Report*, August 13, 2020. The charges against Karoui, which remain pending, stem from an investigation by a local anti-corruption organization, iWatch, into the financial structure and tax payments of Nessma, one of Karoui’s companies. See POMED, *A Guide to Tunisia’s 2019 Presidential Election*, September 2019.

<sup>22</sup> *The Arab Weekly*, “Alleged Violations Mar Tunisia’s Parliamentary Elections,” October 10, 2019; *TAP*, “Second tour du scrutin présidentiel : Les dispositions réglementaires respectées à 98%, selon Mourakiboun,” October 13, 2019.

<sup>23</sup> NDI, “The ‘real anti-system candidate’ set to curb foreign funds, remake Tunisian politics,” October 14, 2019.

<sup>24</sup> Ramy Allahoum, “Kais Saïed: Who is Tunisia’s new president?” October 23, 2019.

<sup>25</sup> Drawn from: *Al-Monitor*, “Tunisia’s ‘Poker-Face’ President Sworn In,” October 23, 2019; *L’Obs*, “‘Ai-je l’air d’un salafiste?’: Kais Saïed, favori de la présidentielle tunisienne, s’explique,” September 20, 2019; POMED, *A Guide to Tunisia’s 2019 Presidential Election*, September 2019; *Business News*, “Kaïs Saïed: j’éliminerai les élections



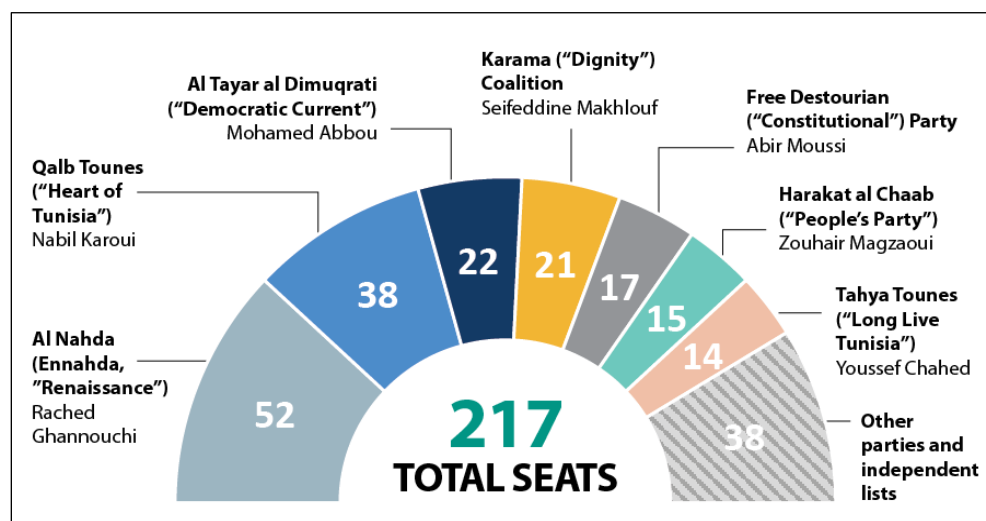
constitution, calling for eliminating the directly elected legislature in favor of local councils that would, in turn, select national leaders. (In early 2021, he expressed support for Tunisia's 1959 constitution, which established a centralized presidential political system with few checks and balances.) He also voiced opposition to proposals to make Tunisia's inheritance laws more gender-equal, called for resurrection of the death penalty (suspended since 1994), and referred to homosexuality as a foreign plot. In his inauguration speech, President Saïed vowed to fight poverty and corruption, counter terrorism, protect women's rights, and champion the Palestinian cause.

Saïed's stern personal demeanor, anti-corruption message, pledges of systemic change, and outsider credentials appear to have endeared him to many voters—including otherwise politically disenchanted young people. His views defy easy ideological categorization. He was endorsed in the run-off by Al Nahda and the religiously conservative and nationalist Karama ("Dignity") coalition—which later became key antagonists—along with several secularist leftist parties. Saïed asserted at the time that any endorsements were unilateral on these parties' part.

In the parliamentary contest, Al Nahda secured a slim plurality (**Figure 2**) but lost seats and vote share compared to 2014, reflecting a continued decline in the party's popularity since 2011. Al Nahda later saw a wave of senior defections, presaging more recent fractures and eroding the party's image of discipline and internal democracy.<sup>26</sup> Leader Rached Ghannouchi, running for office for the first time since the party's legalization in 2011, won a seat (representing part of Tunis) and was elected Speaker with the support of Karoui's Qalb Tounes (Heart of Tunisia).

**Figure 2. Parliamentary Election Results: 2019**

displayed left to right from most to fewest seats won per party/coalition/independent list



**Source:** CRS graphic, based on data released by Tunisia's election commission on November 8, 2019.

**Note:** Proportions shifted over time; under Tunisia's parliamentary rules, members of parliament can change party affiliation without losing their seats.

The 2019 parliamentary elections also saw the rise of the Free Destourian ("Constitutional") Party, led by Abir Moussi—a former top official in the Ben Ali-era ruling party who has decried Tunisia's 2011 uprising as a foreign plot—along with the socially conservative Islamist Karama ("Dignity") coalition. Leaders in the two blocs soon engaged in verbal and physical skirmishes on the floor of parliament. A large number of independents and small parties won one to two seats in parliament each, further challenging coalition-building.

législatives et je suis pour la peine de mort," June 11, 2019.

<sup>26</sup> See Anne Wolf, "Is Rached Ghannouchi Ennahda's President for Life?" POMED, July 2021; Hatem Nafti, "Ennahda défait par l'épreuve du pouvoir," *OrientXXI*, March 18, 2021.

Protracted negotiations delayed the formation of a coalition government for months. The 2014 constitution tasks the largest party in parliament with nominating a prime minister, but Al Nahda's nominee failed to garner majority backing. President Saïed then designated a technocrat as prime minister, Elyes Fakhfakh, who formed a coalition government backed by parliament, narrowly averting new elections. Five months later, Fakhfakh resigned in the face of a corruption scandal, an economic crisis deepened by the COVID-19 pandemic, and power struggles within the coalition. President Saïed designated another technocrat, Hichem Mechichi, but the two soon struggled over control of cabinet appointments and the internal security services.<sup>27</sup> By mid-2021, amid worsening economic and health crises, the government was at a stalemate.

### Women's Rights in Tunisia<sup>28</sup>

Tunisia is among the top performing Arab countries in terms of women's representation in politics. Women won 54 seats in parliament in the 2019 elections (25%, a decline from 34% in 2014), and women reportedly headed about 14% of all electoral lists.<sup>29</sup> Under Tunisia's electoral law, parliamentary candidate lists must alternate between men and women candidates, meaning that any party or independent list that wins more than one seat in a given electoral district will send at least one woman to parliament. No parties nominated a woman candidate for the presidential elections.

The legal and socioeconomic status of women is an outlier within the Arab world. Polygamy is banned, and women enjoy equal citizenship rights and the right to initiate divorce. Women serve in the military and in many professions, and constitute more than half of university students; the first woman governor was appointed in 2004. Many Tunisians attribute these advances to the country's relatively liberal Personal Status Code, promulgated in 1956 under then-President Habib Bourguiba, as well as Bourguiba-era educational reforms. Inheritance laws and practices are nonetheless disadvantageous toward women. Former President Caïd Essbsi put forward a proposal in 2018 to reform the inheritance laws to be more gender-equal, but his coalition partner Al Nahda did not back the reform and it did not advance.

A 2016 report by the Ministry of Women, Family, Children and Seniors found that some 60% of Tunisian women had experienced domestic violence at some point in their lifetimes.<sup>30</sup> During the COVID-19 pandemic, the same ministry announced a seven-fold increase in gender-based violence cases from 2019.<sup>31</sup> In 2017, parliament passed a law to prevent and address violence against women, though there have been challenges to full implementation.<sup>32</sup> Congress directed some funds "to support implementation of Tunisia's Law on Eliminating Violence Against Women" in the explanatory statement accompanying the FY2018 foreign operations appropriations measure (Division K, P.L. 115-141). Starting in late 2019, Tunisian women began to share testimonies of sexual harassment under the hashtag #EnaZeda, ("MeToo" in Tunisian dialect) in response to a video allegedly showing a newly elected Member of Parliament from the Qalb Tounes party masturbating in front of a school.<sup>33</sup> The MP was subsequently criminally charged, and his trial opened in October 2021.

## The Economy

Textiles, agriculture, tourism, and phosphate mining are key sectors of the economy; Tunisia produces some oil but is a net energy importer. The COVID-19 pandemic has deepened Tunisia's economic challenges through its impact on global tourism and trade, along with the effects of local lockdown measures. The economy shrank by an estimated 8.6% in 2020, following years of

<sup>27</sup> Reuters, "Tunisian president's feud with party elites drove him to seize reins of power," August 8, 2021.

<sup>28</sup> Sarah Collins, Research Assistant for the Middle East and Africa, contributed to this text box.

<sup>29</sup> Data from the *Majles Marsad* project, at <https://majles.marsad.tn/2019/>.

<sup>30</sup> *New York Times*, "'I Can Finally Dream': Tunisia Expands Protection for Battered Women," May 12, 2018.

<sup>31</sup> Amnesty International, "Tunisia: The tragic truth about domestic violence," May 21, 2021.

<sup>32</sup> See, e.g., *HuffPost*, "Tunisia's Violence Against Women Law Seemed Perfect on Paper. In Practice, It Hasn't Been.," December 13, 2018.

<sup>33</sup> *Le Monde*, "#EnaZeda, le #metoo tunisien est né," October 15, 2019.

anemic growth, according to International Monetary Fund (IMF) data. Gross public debt, which stood at 74% of GDP in 2019, rose to an estimated 90% of GDP in 2021.

President Saïed's actions on July 25 disrupted negotiations with the IMF over a new lending program, raising concerns about a possible fiscal and/or debt repayment crisis.<sup>34</sup> After suspending parliament, Saïed ordered local traders to charge less for food and medicines, and floated an offer of amnesty for corrupt individuals if they agree to finance infrastructure projects, but did not articulate a broader economic plan. As of mid-October 2021, the government was reportedly seeking financial support from Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.<sup>35</sup>

Even prior to the pandemic, the size and purchasing power of Tunisia's once robust middle class shrank over the past decade.<sup>36</sup> Nominal per-capita GDP dropped below the World Bank's upper middle-income threshold (currently \$4,096) in 2015, and stood at \$3,323 in 2020, per IMF data. The unemployment rate has hovered around 15% in recent years and rose above 17% in 2020; the rate is reportedly at least twice as high among young people.

Tunisia's economy faces structural challenges along with the legacy of state capture by the pre-2011 Ben Ali regime. Wealth remains concentrated along the urban, tourist-friendly coast, while the rural interior exhibits relative poverty and a lack of investment. Many Tunisians are highly educated, but the economy has generally created low-skilled and low-paid jobs, fueling unemployment and under-employment. Ongoing instability in Libya (previously a destination for Tunisian workers) and economic strains in the European Union (Tunisia's largest trade partner) have also impeded growth. Successive governments do not appear to have substantively advanced reforms of state regulations that reportedly enabled corruption and cronyism under Ben Ali.<sup>37</sup>

Previous governments have struggled to address economic grievances such as high unemployment and cost of living, while facing simultaneous donor-backed appeals for greater fiscal discipline. During the implementation of a four-year, \$2.9 billion IMF program that concluded in 2020, IMF officials expressed concerns that Tunisia was not making sufficient progress in reducing state subsidies, public sector wages, and pensions.<sup>38</sup> Attempts to do so sparked intense opposition from the UGTT and the public. Some measures implemented at the urging of the IMF—such as devaluation of the dinar and tax increases—arguably deepened economic grievances without delivering greater fiscal sustainability.<sup>39</sup> The IMF has continued to urge Tunisia to downsize state-owned enterprises and phase out energy subsidies.<sup>40</sup>

## Security Threats

Internal security has generally improved since a string of large terrorist attacks in 2015-2016,<sup>41</sup> progress that may be attributable to improved internal coordination and capacity-building

<sup>34</sup> Reuters, "Now in charge, Tunisian president faces looming fiscal crisis," August 17, 2021.

<sup>35</sup> Middle East Eye, "Tunisia in 'advanced talks' with Saudi Arabia, UAE for financial aid," October 17, 2021.

<sup>36</sup> Middle East Eye, "'Two classes left - rich and poor': Sinking Tunisia's currency," May 4, 2018.

<sup>37</sup> See World Bank, *The Unfinished Revolution*, May 2014; Sada, "Tunisia's Fight Against Corruption: An Interview with Chawki Tabib," May 11, 2017.

<sup>38</sup> IMF, "IMF Executive Board Completes Fifth Review Under the Extended Fund Facility (EFF) Arrangement for Tunisia," June 12, 2019.

<sup>39</sup> Fadil Aliriza, "In surveys, Tunisians tell of continuous economic grievances," MEI, September 27, 2021; *The Economist*, "Fiddling While Carthage Burns," October 2, 2021.

<sup>40</sup> IMF, "Key Questions on Tunisia," April 10, 2020.

<sup>41</sup> In 2015, terrorist attacks at the Bardo Museum in Tunis and the coastal city of Sousse killed dozens of people,

assistance from donors including the United States. Small-scale terrorist attacks have nonetheless occurred in recent years, including a suicide bombing near the U.S. Embassy in Tunis in early 2020, which killed a Tunisian police officer, and near-simultaneous suicide bombings against two police posts in Tunis in mid-2019, which were claimed by the Islamic State (IS, aka ISIS/ISIL). Turmoil in neighboring Libya and the return of Tunisian Islamist fighters from abroad (primarily Syria, Iraq, and Libya) also continue to pose challenges. Local groups affiliated with Al Qaeda and the Islamic State remain active in border areas, where they periodically attack Tunisian security forces. The State Department has warned U.S. citizens to avoid travel to parts of southern, western, and central Tunisia, citing terrorist threats.<sup>42</sup> Tunisia's southernmost desert area is a military zone, where all travel is restricted.

Despite its small population, Tunisia was reportedly a top source of foreign fighters at the height of IS territorial influence in Iraq and Syria (2014-2015). U.N. investigators estimated in 2015 that 4,000 Tunisians were fighting in Syria, along with up to 1,500 in Libya, 200 in Iraq, 60 in Mali, and 50 in Yemen, with an additional 625 having reportedly returned from Iraq.<sup>43</sup> (In the mid-2000s, Tunisia was reportedly a prominent source of foreign fighters in the Iraq-based group that evolved into the Islamic State.) Tunisian officials reported in early 2019 that 1,000 foreign fighters had returned since 2011, and that authorities had prevented at least 17,000 others from leaving for combat zones abroad.<sup>44</sup>

Youth marginalization, police brutality, and the mass release of terrorism suspects under a general amnesty in 2011 appear to have fueled the overt emergence of domestic Islamist extremist organizations following the 2011 uprising and subsequent combatant outflows. Previously, a number of Tunisian fighters and recruiters supported jihadist groups in Iraq in the mid-2000s, and some were captured and transferred to prisons back in Tunisia; these networks reportedly laid the groundwork for the prominent role later played by Tunisian Islamist fighters in Syria.<sup>45</sup>

## U.S. Policy

The United States and Tunisia have cultivated warm ties since 2011, underpinned by U.S. support for Tunisian democracy and security cooperation to counter regional terrorism threats. The two countries have a Joint Economic Commission and a Joint Military Commission. President Obama initiated a Bilateral Strategic Dialogue (alongside similar dialogues with other North African countries) in 2014 and designated Tunisia a Major Non-NATO Ally in 2015, after Tunisia adopted a new constitution and held multiparty elections. According to the State Department, "one of the United States' priorities is to help Tunisia provide a secure environment conducive to the development of democratic institutions and practices, and to inclusive economic growth."<sup>46</sup>

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including foreign tourists. These were the deadliest attacks in Tunisia since an Al Qaeda bombing of a synagogue on the island of Djerba in 2002. In early 2016, Tunisian security forces and local inhabitants defeated a militant assault on the border town of Ben Guerdane (near Libya) that prompted fears of an Islamic State-linked insurgency. The 2015-2016 attacks were reportedly planned from Libya; a U.S. military strike on the Libyan town of Sabratha reportedly killed a number of Tunisian fighters in February 2016.

<sup>42</sup> State Department, "Tunisia Travel Advisory," July 12, 2021.

<sup>43</sup> U.N. Office of the High Commissioner on Human Rights (UNOHCHR), "Foreign fighters: Urgent measures needed to stop flow from Tunisia – UN expert group warns," July 10, 2015.

<sup>44</sup> TAP, "A thousand Tunisians have returned from conflict zones from 2011 until October 2018, says Mokhtar Ben Nasr," February 18, 2019.

<sup>45</sup> Aaron Zelin, *Your Sons Are at Your Service: Tunisia's Missionaries of Jihad*, Columbia University Press: 2020.

<sup>46</sup> State Department, "U.S. Relations With Tunisia," November 6, 2020 [current].

Biden Administration officials pursued high-level engagements with Tunisian counterparts in the first half of 2021, albeit constrained by COVID-19 restrictions.<sup>47</sup> Vice President Kamala Harris spoke to President Saïed in May 2021, at which time she “underscored the United States’ sustained commitment to supporting Tunisia’s democracy,” and voiced support for Tunisia’s IMF negotiations along with “timely implementation” of economic reform commitments.<sup>48</sup>

Following President Saïed’s actions in July 2021, a senior Biden Administration delegation traveled to Tunisia and called for a “swift return to the path of Tunisia’s parliamentary democracy,” while acknowledging economic and health challenges that presaged Saïed’s moves.<sup>49</sup> On October 7, the State Department urged President Saïed and Prime Minister Bouden “to respond to the Tunisian people’s call for a clear roadmap for a return to a transparent, democratic process, involving civil society and diverse political voices,” adding that it was “concerned and disappointed by recent reports from Tunisia on infringements on freedom of the press and expression.”<sup>50</sup> U.S. diplomatic messaging since July 25 has been broadly consistent with that of other Western donors, which have called for a return to “constitutional order.”<sup>51</sup>

### U.S.-Tunisia Relations: Historical Background

U.S.-Tunisian relations date back over 200 years. Tunisia was the site of significant World War II battles, and a U.S. cemetery and memorial in Carthage (outside Tunis) holds nearly 3,000 U.S. military dead. During the Cold War, Tunisia pursued a pro-Western foreign policy, despite an experiment with leftist economic policies in the 1960s. Still, U.S.-Tunisian ties were strained by Israel’s 1985 bombing of the Palestine Liberation Organization headquarters in Tunis, which some Tunisians viewed as having been carried out with U.S. approval.<sup>52</sup> More recently, the 2012 attack on the U.S. embassy and American school, days after the Benghazi attacks in Libya, temporarily cooled relations as U.S. officials criticized the then-government’s handling of the investigation.<sup>53</sup>

## U.S. Aid and Security Cooperation

U.S. bilateral aid for Tunisia grew significantly after 2011, initially via executive branch decisions to reprogram resources on an emergency basis, and subsequently through increased annual aid appropriations by Congress. In recent years, Congress has annually provided \$191 million in U.S. bilateral aid appropriations and \$50 million in additional prior-year funds for Tunisia (**Table 1**, below); Congress did not enact aid cuts proposed by the Trump Administration between FY2018 and FY2021. The Biden Administration proposed \$197 million in bilateral aid for Tunisia under its FY2022 budget proposal, issued in early 2021. The State Department has

<sup>47</sup> State Department, “Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman’s Engagements with Tunisian Government Officials and Civil Society Leaders,” June 25, 2021; TAP, “Jerandi Holds Talks in Berlin With U.S. Secretary of State,” June 24, 2021.

<sup>48</sup> White House, “Readout of Vice President Kamala Harris Call with President Kais Saïed of Tunisia,” May 11, 2021.

<sup>49</sup> White House, “Readout from NSC Spokesperson Emily Horne on Senior Administration Officials Travel to Tunisia,” August 13, 2021. Prior to the August 13 delegation, National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan spoke with President Saïed to convey “President Biden’s strong support for the people of Tunisia and for Tunisian democracy based on fundamental rights, strong institutions, and a commitment to the rule of law” (White House, “Readout by NSC Spokesperson Emily Horne of National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan’s Call with President Kais Saïed of Tunisia,” July 31, 2021). On July 26, Secretary of State Antony Blinken spoke to President Saïed and encouraged him “to adhere to the principles of democracy and human rights that are the basis of governance in Tunisia” (State Department, “Secretary Blinken’s Call with Tunisian President Kais Saïed,” July 26, 2021).

<sup>50</sup> State Department press briefing, October 7, 2021.

<sup>51</sup> Statement by Group of Seven (G7) Ambassadors in Tunisia, September 6, 2021.

<sup>52</sup> Jonathan C. Randal, “Raid Left Scars on U.S.-Tunisia Ties,” *The Washington Post*, March 5, 1987.

<sup>53</sup> See, e.g., U.S. Embassy Tunis statement, May 29, 2013.



allocated additional funds for Tunisia under global and regional programs, and the Department of Defense (DOD) has provided military training and equipment and support for border security. As noted above (“Introduction”), some Members of Congress have called for a review or suspension of certain U.S. aid and/or security cooperation in light of President Saïed’s recent actions.

In June 2021, the U.S. Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) approved a five-year, \$499 million development aid compact that would seek to strengthen Tunisia’s transportation, trade, and water sectors. According to the MCC, as of October 2021, the compact had not been signed “due to democratic governance concerns following the events of July 25”; for full funding to be made available, Tunisia’s parliament must also ratify the compact pursuant to Tunisian law, and then MCC and the government of Tunisia must agree for the compact to enter into force.<sup>54</sup>

Recent U.S. bilateral economic aid administered by the State Department and U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) has focused on promoting good governance, encouraging private sector growth, and countering violent extremism. USAID upgraded its presence in Tunis to a full bilateral mission in 2019, and pledged up to \$352 million in assistance over the following five years.<sup>55</sup> In the initial years after Tunisia’s 2011 uprising, Congress provided \$100 million for a Tunisian-American Enterprise Fund with a mandate to invest in small- and medium-sized enterprises, along with funds for three U.S. loan guarantees that allowed Tunisia to access up to \$1.5 billion in financing from international capital markets.<sup>56</sup>

#### **U.S. COVID-19 Assistance**

The United States delivered 1 million donated doses of the Moderna COVID-19 vaccine to Tunisia on July 30, 2021, and nearly 700,000 doses of the Pfizer vaccine in mid-September, working through the multilateral COVAX initiative.<sup>57</sup> The State Department and USAID have allocated at least \$1.4 million in COVID-19-related health assistance for Tunisia since 2020.<sup>58</sup> DOD helped construct a new wing at a Tunisian hospital to be used as an overflow ward for COVID-19 or other emergencies in September 2021, and delivered oxygen cylinders in July.<sup>59</sup>

U.S.-Tunisia security cooperation has expanded since 2011 as Tunisia has sought to maintain its U.S.-origin defense materiel, reform its security institutions, and respond to terrorist threats. Congress has annually appropriated \$85 million in Foreign Military Financing (FMF) aid for Tunisia in recent years, more than for any other country within U.S. Africa Command’s area of responsibility. Congress also has provided \$13 million per year in State Department-administered bilateral aid for law enforcement strengthening and reform, and the State Department has allocated additional internal security aid under its Counterterrorism Partnerships Fund and the Trans-Sahara Counter-Terrorism Partnership (TSCTP). Tunisia has been a top recipient within Africa of DOD-administered global train-and-equip assistance (currently authorized under 10 U.S.C. 333). DOD also has provided border security support under nonproliferation authorities.

Over the past decade, the State Department has licensed, with congressional assent, military sales to Tunisia of Wolverine light attack aircraft, Kiowa Warrior helicopter equipment and support,

<sup>54</sup> MCC communications with CRS, October 2021.

<sup>55</sup> USAID, “U.S. Signs Landmark Agreement with the Government of Tunisia,” August 30, 2019.

<sup>56</sup> See CRS Report R46796, *Congress and the Middle East, 2011-2020: Selected Case Studies*.

<sup>57</sup> State Department, COVID-19 Vaccine Distribution: Tunisia, at <https://www.state.gov/countries-areas/tunisia/>.

<sup>58</sup> COVID-19-related aid figure provided to CRS by the State Department.

<sup>59</sup> U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM), “Seabees construct new ward at Tunisian hospital to support covid, future response needs,” September 24, 2021; U.S. Embassy in Tunisia, “U.S. Donation of 310 Oxygen Canisters Over One Million Liters to the Ministry of Health,” July 27, 2021.

and Black Hawk helicopters.<sup>60</sup> Tunisia's Major Non-NATO Ally status confers priority in Excess Defense Articles (EDA) grant-based transfers (22 U.S.C. 2321j), and Tunisia has received equipment including Kiowa helicopters and C-130 aircraft through the EDA program.

The U.S. military has, at times, conducted intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance activities from a Tunisian facility, and U.S. soldiers have reportedly advised some local counterterrorism activities.<sup>61</sup> In mid-2021, Tunisia hosted part of African Lion, U.S. Africa Command's "premier joint annual exercise," involving thousands of U.S. and partner nation forces, and also hosted a U.S. multinational military maritime exercise, Phoenix Express. Tunisia cooperates with NATO's Operation Active Endeavor, which provides counterterrorism surveillance in the Mediterranean; participates in NATO's Mediterranean Dialogue; and allows NATO ships to make port calls.

**Table 1. U.S. Bilateral Foreign Assistance to Tunisia, State Department and USAID**  
allocations by year of appropriation, current \$ millions

	FY2015	FY2016	FY2017	FY2018	FY2019	FY2020	FY2021 (enact.)	FY2022 (req.)
<b>Total*</b>	61.4	141.9	205.2	165.3	191.4	191.4	191.4	197.1
DA	-	-	-	-	-	40.0	45.0	-
ESF	20.0	60.0	89.0	79.0	85.0	45.0	40.0	85.0
INCLE	7.0	12.0	13.0	13.0	13.0	13.0	13.0	22.8
NADR	2.2	2.6	6.1	6.1	6.1	6.1	6.1	2.0
IMET	2.2	2.3	2.1	2.2	2.3	2.3	2.3	2.3
FMF	30.0	65.0	95.0	65.0	85.0	85.0	85.0	85.0

**Source:** State Department Congressional Budget Justifications, FY2017-FY2022; conference report accompanying Division K of P.L. 116-260 (FY2021).

**\* Notes:** From FY2019 to FY2021, Congress annually directed **\$50 million** in additional prior-year funds for Tunisia (\$50 million in prior-year Relief and Recovery Fund under the FY2019 act, and \$50 million in prior-year ESF under the FY2020 and FY2021 acts). Table does not include funds administered by other federal entities or funds allocated on a regional or global basis. DA = Development Assistance; ESF = Economic Support Fund; FMF = Foreign Military Financing; IMET = International Military Education & Training; INCLE = International Narcotics Control and Law Enforcement; NADR = Nonproliferation, Antiterrorism, Demining, and Related Programs.

### Selected Recent Legislative Provisions

Congress has provided a minimum floor of aid for Tunisia in annual appropriations measures since FY2016, most recently under P.L. 116-260 (§7041j of Division K). Congress also has continued to make funds available for U.S. loan guarantees for Tunisia (including under P.L. 116-260), although the United States has not provided one since Tunisia's last IMF program was agreed to in 2016. In recent years, Congress has made additional funds available for Tunisia under the State Department-administered Relief and Recovery Fund (RRF)—for areas under IS threat—and DOD's Counter-ISIS Train and Equip Fund. Congress also has authorized and appropriated funds for DOD to reimburse Tunisia for costs associated with securing its border with Libya (most recently under P.L. 116-260, §9026 of Division C). The House-passed FY2022 aid appropriations bill, H.R. 4373, would provide at least \$197 million for Tunisia. The Senate-introduced bill, S. 3075, would institute reporting and notification requirements prior to obligating aid for Tunisia, and would not set a minimum funding level for the country.

<sup>60</sup> Defense Security Cooperation Agency public releases, <https://www.dsca.mil/tags/tunisia>.

<sup>61</sup> Press briefing by General Thomas Waldhauser, then Commander of U.S. AFRICOM, March 24, 2017; *New York Times*, "Why the U.S. and Tunisia Keep Their Cooperation Secret," March 2, 2019.



## Author Information

Alexis Arief  
Specialist in African Affairs

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